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C O N F I D E N T I A L USUN NEW YORK 000750

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/05/2019
TAGS: PREL PTER KPKO KBIO UNSC IS LE
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR RICE'S AUGUST 5 MEETING WITH UNIFIL
FORCE COMMANDER

Classified By: Ambassador Susan E. Rice for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador Rice met with UNIFIL Force Commander General Graziano on August 5 to discuss UNIFIL's needs, its mandate renewal before the Security Council, and the July 14-18 incidents in Khirbat Silim. General Graziano underscored that the real problem facing UNIFIL is the lack of progress on political issues and the risk that an incident will lead to a broader conflict. He asked that the Council, when undertaking UNIFIL's mandate renewal, stress to the parties the need for their full cooperation with UNIFIL. He said that the Khirbat Silim incident will allow UNIFIL to press the LAF to work even more with it in southern Lebanon.
END SUMMARY.

¶12. (C) Ambassador Rice met on August 5 with UNIFIL Force Commander Major General Claudio Graziano who was in New York for a DPKO Head of Mission/Force Commanders conference. Ambassador Rice pressed General Graziano to articulate any needs that UNIFIL may have so that it can more robustly carry out its mandate. General Graziano demurred on citing any specific equipment or manpower needs. He said that UNIFIL's troop strength at 12,000-12,500 is appropriate, given the significant number of European battalions in UNIFIL who are more mechanized and, therefore, more powerful. If there were fewer European battalions in UNIFIL, then a higher manpower level, closer to the authorized 15,000 troop ceiling would be needed, he said.

¶13. (C) General Graziano stressed that the real problem facing UNIFIL is the lack of progress on political issues and the risk that an incident will lead to a broader conflict. He said that a few of the troop contributing countries may come to the conclusion that progress toward a political solution is not possible and will decide to withdraw their participation from UNIFIL. He also cited the difficulties facing the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) given the lack of Lebanese political leadership during the government formation process. In terms of assistance specifically from the Security Council during the mandate renewal process, he asked that the Council stress to the parties the need for their full cooperation with UNIFIL.

¶14. (C) Ambassador Rice referred to her testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on July 29 when she received a number of questions about whether UNIFIL was acting robustly enough and whether it was sympathetic to Hizballah. Graziano said that he had read her testimony and that UNIFIL's mandate, while not the best one, was the best possible one at the time. He said that a different mandate would not be possible today in Lebanon because it would make an enemy of Hizballah and Hizballah, to the people of southern Lebanon, is not just a militia but also a political party and a symbol of resistance to Israel. When questioned about LAF-Hizballah cooperation, Graziano replied that he does not think there is actual military cooperation between the two but they do speak a lot, particularly given that Hizballah is part of the government.

¶ 15. (C) General Graziano noted that UNIFIL will be able to use the Khirbat Silim incident on July 14 to press the LAF to work even more with UNIFIL. In terms of the impediments to UNIFIL's freedom of movement surrounding the Khirbat Silim event, Graziano said that the key is to work even harder to explain UNIFIL's mandate to the local population. He said that generally the population likes UNIFIL but Hezbollah does exercise a lot of influence. He noted that there is a difference between a crowd of stone-throwing women and children and one of armed militia members.

¶ 16. (C) Bio Note: Major General Graziano told Ambassador Rice that he expects to be promoted on January 1, so he has no plans to stay on with UNIFIL past the expiration of his term as UNIFIL Force Commander in February 2010. He said that he does not yet know what his onward assignment will be with the Italian military. (Comment: We understand from Italian military sources at the UN, Graziano may be in line to eventually assume the Italian Joint Chiefs of Staff position-equivalent. End comment.)

RICE